

Geopolitical Diary: The Start of Cold War II?



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Legislators in the Georgian breakaway republic of Abkhazia signed a statement on Thursday accusing Georgia of aggression and warning of the possibility of war in the Caucasus. In Moscow, the Russian parliament urged the government to send additional peacekeepers to both Abkhazia and Georgia's other breakaway republic, South Ossetia. Elsewhere, the Kremlin's NATO envoy said Russia wants an emergency meeting with the Western military alliance to discuss the March 19 move by U.S. President George W. Bush to establish Kosovar eligibility for military assistance from the United States.

These developments follow a series of similar events in the past few weeks, underscoring an escalation of tensions between the United States and Russia in the wake of Kosovo's Feb. 17 declaration of independence. The flurry of activity includes moves to expand NATO, violent reactions from Kosovar Serbs, the U.S. attempt to construct ballistic missile defense installations in Eastern Europe, and Russia's apprehension of Western spies in Moscow. All these events clearly underscore that the Cold War is back.

Cold War II is different than the original Cold War, which was a Soviet-U.S. confrontation that lasted from the end of World War II to the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. Nuclear-armed ideological rivals Washington and Moscow competed for global influence, and a divided Europe was a key theater in which this war played out. Cold War II is being waged by a far more powerful United States and a vastly weakened Russia — an emasculated successor to the Soviet Union.

Another key difference between the new and old Cold War is that Europe no longer is just a theater in which the Americans and Russians are playing geopolitical chess. The Europeans are playing major roles as independent actors in this new Cold War. This time around, Europe as a continent is not exactly occupied and has recovered from both World War II and the first Cold War. But the European Union is an increasingly incoherent entity, with the three principal state actors — Germany, France and the United Kingdom — not interested in confronting Russia.

Berlin made this very clear when it expressed a lack of interest in NATO expansion, the independence of Kosovo and the Ukraine gas issue. This is not surprising, given that the Germans are dependent upon Moscow for energy. Beyond energy, Germany's wider economic relationship with and its proximity to Russia inform its lack of appetite for confrontation with the Kremlin. But this does not mean that Berlin won't take on Moscow when it deems necessary. Germany is re-

emerging on its own to again become an international power player.

France is even further removed from the new Cold War dynamics. Paris has its own ideas about how it wishes to advance itself as an international player, which has very little to do with West vs. Russia competition. Geographically far more insulated, it wants no part in this new Cold War.

As for the British, they have enough domestic political issues to sort out, which is why they also are out of the game. That said, given London's historic role as a major U.S. ally, the United Kingdom cannot avoid the issues that the United States is dealing with. Therefore, at best the British will maintain a low-key role in the U.S. moves to continue its geopolitical push against Russia.

The United States — considering that it has the luxury of waging a geopolitical assault against Russia from afar — is not bothered by the lack of European involvement. But the European position is not tenable in the long run. Europe's geography — and the fact that, unlike during the original Cold War, there isn't an iron curtain in place — will force the Europeans to jump in or at least choose sides.